

A Summary Report on the Bus Mediation Program
at Olson Contemporary School
1607 51st Ave. N.
Minneapolis, MN 55430

Submitted by Debra Hahn for the
Center for Urban and Regional Affairs,
330 Humphrey Center
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

April 12, 1993

CURA has supported the work of the author(s) of this report but has not reviewed it for final publication. Its content is solely the responsibility of the author(s) and is not necessarily endorsed by CURA.

CURA RESOURCE COLLECTION

Center for Urban and Regional Affairs
University of Minnesota
330 Humphrey Center

The research project on the Bus Mediation Program (BMP) at Olson Contemporary School in Minneapolis was funded by the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota, and by the Teacher Venture Fund of Education Ventures, Incorporated. Olson School is an elementary school in North Minneapolis and is part of the Minneapolis Public School System. Approximately 800 children from kindergarten to sixth grade attend school at Olson and approximately 600 of those students ride school buses (10 buses with about 60 students on each).

The BMP was designed primarily by Ida-Lorraine Wilderson, Ph.D. and former assistant principal; Susan Longstaff, fourth-grade teacher; and myself. The program set out to teach peer mediation as a problem-solving approach to handling conflicts arising on school buses. It was believed that providing a calm and safe bus ride to and from school is not only positive in and of itself, but also that reducing tension on the school buses would result in an increased readiness of students to engage in productive classroom activities. Since this was a peer mediation program, students helped other students solve their conflicts, and the process was an empowering one. Ideally, school climate would be improved and students' self-concepts would be increased as students learned a positive way in which to handle their own conflicts, without having rules or punishment imposed upon them by an adult authority figure. By participating in peer mediation it was hoped that students' expectations of themselves and others would be increased and that positive risk-taking would be encouraged. Those who designed the BMP wanted to generate school-wide interest in the program, as well to as increase and sustain involvement of parents, especially African American and Asian American parents.

I began training fifth- and sixth-graders in basic conflict resolution and peer mediation using the curriculum "Lessons in Conflict Resolution Mediation" from the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution. I believe that any conflict resolution curriculum would have worked equally well because curricula seem to be similar. In the beginning, I met with 20 bus mediators, half at a time, two times a week (later once a week) for half an hour. Mediators were taken out of afternoon classes for one half hour in order to attend meetings. I broke the New Mexico curriculum down into four basic study areas and added a fifth area which focused on the specific procedures

we used at Olson in order to mediate conflicts arising on school buses.

The five areas of focus were:

1. Conflict - What is it? What are various styles of handling it and how do they work?
2. Understanding feelings and why they are important in conflict resolution.
3. Communication skills for conflict resolution - active listening, focusing on nonverbal communication.
4. Problem-solving and the conflict management process.
5. Olson School's Bus Mediation process (see attached sheet "Bus Mediation Basics" which was given to bus mediators to review).

Bus mediators were acquired primarily on a volunteer basis. When I arrived at Olson there were 20 mediators who had "carried over" from the Spring 1992 mediation training session of the BMP Pilot Project (through this project, 20 students and 24 parents participated in mediation training sessions led by Dr. Wilderson and Ms. Longstaff). By December we had to limit the number of bus mediators to 40, as more and more students were volunteering to be mediators or expressing an interest in the BMP. Most of the 20 students who became new mediators while I was at Olson volunteered themselves, but a few students' parents contacted me and Dr. Wilderson, asking if their children could be mediators. I spent extra time working with new bus mediators to teach them the basics of the conflict resolution model, and to help them catch up to their peers who had been working on the mediation skills longer. Of the 40 bus mediators, two were fourth-graders and the rest were fifth- and sixth-graders. With 40 mediators, all 10 school buses at Olson could participate in the BMP and each bus had one to four mediators. So that they could be identified by students and drivers, bus mediators wore Bus Mediation T-shirts designed by an Olson student.

The role of the bus mediators was to be effective problem-solvers without becoming bossy or elitist. Students were to be peer **mediators**, not patrols who enforced the rules of the bus. While actually riding the bus, mediators were to simply be good role models, follow all bus rules, and fill out any necessary Mediation Request Cards, which will be explained in a later paragraph. It would not be safe for mediators to yell at other students on the bus or to leave their seats to talk with other students on the bus.

Mediation Requests were given to Dr. Wilderson or to me when students arrived at school, and mediation sessions took place later the same day. Although mediators knew bus rules well and were expected to follow them as were all other students, mediators were by no means perfect. At times a mediator would be involved in a bus conflict and would participate in a mediation session just as any other student involved in a conflict. Mediators who had behavior problems were not prevented from being mediators. It was believed that learning mediation skills is beneficial to any student, and that learning such problem-solving skills provides students with a positive outlet for their energy. Finally, it was hoped that mediation problem-solving skills of students would be transferred to other life areas such as the classroom, playground, and home.

Shortly after I began at Olson, I met all of the bus drivers and discussed the BMP with them. Most drivers knew about the program, as in the spring of 1992 a meeting was held to tell them about the BMP and to take any suggestions drivers might have. However, keeping drivers updated and informed about the program was difficult because there is fairly high turn over among bus drivers and companies.

As well as keeping bus drivers updated on the BMP, Dr. Wilderson and I kept in close contact with the parents of bus mediators. We believed that parent support was essential in helping mediators be effective, and hoped to keep parents actively involved and aware of the BMP. I mailed a letter to all parents/guardians of bus mediators in late October, telling them who I was and about the BMP. At the bottom of the letter was a response sheet for parents to rip off and send back to me through their children. The response sheet simply asked whether parents would be interested in being involved in some aspect of the BMP. No response sheets were returned.

After one-and-a-half months of training, the bus mediators became anxious to put their skills to use. We spent many of our mediation training sessions role-playing hypothetical bus conflicts, and I believe the mediators began to see that the skills they were learning could be useful in helping solve actual conflicts arising on school buses. In early December the bus mediators distributed green Mediation Request Cards to all students on the school buses, explained what they were for, and answered any questions they could which students had. The Request Cards simply asked for students' names,

room numbers, and a brief description of the conflict (see attached Mediation Request Card). Any student who wanted a conflict mediated could fill out a Request Card and give it to a bus mediator or the bus driver. Since the drivers also knew the BMP process, they could answer questions and help explain the process as well. Many students did not use the Request Cards, but some students did use them and all of the students knew that they were available through either bus mediators or the bus driver. Bus mediators or bus drivers could also fill out Mediation Request Cards, however most of the Request Cards received were filled out by bus mediators.

Mediation sessions typically involved two peer bus mediators and two students, called disputants, involved in a conflict. An adult supervised the mediation session, but student mediators were responsible for the progression of the mediation session, which took about 15 minutes. During a typical mediation session, the two mediators asked the disputants to agree to four ground rules necessary for effective mediation (no interrupting, no put-downs, be as honest as you can, try to solve the problem). Then each disputant was asked to tell his/her side of the story and how he/she felt about the conflict. Next, disputants and mediators worked together to find a solution to the conflict and to brainstorm ways to avoid the conflict in the future. Finally disputants agreed on a "What if?" clause in which they specify what will happen (e.g. talk to the assistant principal, mediate the conflict again, etc.) if the conflict arises again. Both disputants and mediators then signed a Mediation Form with the above information reported on it, and they shook hands. The adult supervising the mediation session merely watched, helped mediators take notes on what each person said, and stepped in whenever necessary, as in a situation in which two disputants were hitting each other. See attached Mediation Form which mediators filled out during mediation sessions.

Bus mediation sessions took place in a room designated for this purpose. This worked well as bus mediators and Olson students knew what the room was for, and there was a private place in which to conduct mediations. As I received Mediation Request Cards, I called the disputants involved in the conflict and two bus mediators out of class in order to mediate the conflict. I tried to call at least one mediator from the bus the disputants rode, and often called one male and one female mediator. There were some bus mediators

who did not actually ride buses to school, but who were trained in mediation and who helped mediate conflicts. This was due in part to the fact that some bus mediators who had already been trained moved and no longer rode a bus to school. These students were not expected to stop being bus mediators. In addition, we did not want to deny interested students the chance to be mediators, however we ended up having to do this anyway because of the large number of students interested in the BMP.

Since I was not a member of the Olson School staff, in order to be effective in working with students I felt it necessary to get to know students, the school climate, and parents well. I did this by talking with students, especially bus mediators; attending school functions, such as assemblies or concerts; attending staff meetings; going outside for bus duty and remaining visible; and keeping in contact with parents. On a few occasions I accompanied Dr. Wilderson to the home of a student to talk to the student's parent(s) about situations occurring on the school bus. In order to get a feel for what really happened on the school bus and to help keep things calm, I occasionally rode a school bus in the afternoon. Riding a school bus packed with 60 children was a valuable learning experience, and I think it increased my effectiveness in working with students who rode school buses.

In February and March there were two evening parent/mediator meetings for students and any parents of fourth- through sixth-graders at Olson who wanted to learn more about the BMP. Olson School bus drivers and bus company safety officers were also invited to the evening sessions, however none came. Beginning two weeks before the first meeting, I sent a total of four invitations (two for each meeting) home with students to give to their parents. The invitations told about the agenda of the two nights, including a complimentary light supper and door prizes each night (funded through the Teacher Venture Grant given the BMP), and on the bottom of the invitation was a rip-off response sheet for parents to return. I received good response rates (20 to 30 sheets) for each of the two meetings. In addition, I called the parents of current bus mediators to personally invite them and to see if they had any questions about the meetings or the BMP. Approximately 25 people attended the first parent meeting in which we reviewed the basics of the BMP and the mediation process, demonstrated a peer mediation role-

play, and listened to a presentation on bus safety given by Officer David Marquart of the Minnesota State Patrol.

The second parent/mediator evening meeting was the "Bus Mediator Appreciation Night." Mediators were given buttons to identify them as mediators and certificates to show their completion of the mediation training and participation in the BMP. Approximately 50 people attended the "Bus Mediator Appreciation Night".

I believe that the BMP at Olson has been a success and will continue to be so as the program is carried on by behavior specialists at the school. The project was successful in that bus mediators learned positive problem-solving skills and used them effectively in peer mediation sessions. Bus mediators were proud of their role as peer mediators, and other students in the school looked up to them. School-wide interest in the BMP was generated, and in December I had to put a cap on the number of mediators as I was often approached by students interested in becoming bus mediators, but already had 40 students. Parent involvement was increased during the BMP: 25 and 50 people (many of whom were African American and Asian American) attended the two parent/mediator meetings, as compared to 40 who attended meetings in the spring of 1992 as part of the BMP Pilot Project. Finally, I received approximately one to five Mediation Request Cards each day, and did not always have time to get students together and to supervise all of the mediations requested. Further observation will need to be done in order to assess whether student readiness for class increased, and whether school climate improved because of the BMP.

Many important areas for possible improvement of the BMP were noted during my experience at Olson. My suggestions for the continuation of the BMP were given verbally to the Olson staff members who are currently working with the program. I strongly recommended that someone trained in mediation and working with the BMP set aside at least one hour each day to be designated as bus mediation time. A point needs to be made to get to all current Mediation Request Cards so that the system works more smoothly and so that students know they are being heard. I believe that increasing the visibility of the bus mediators would also be helpful. Although mediators were identified by T-shirts and buttons, it would be helpful to post signs in each bus with the names of the bus mediators who ride that bus. I think

the process of the BMP needs to be explained better to all students who ride the school buses. In the spring of 1992 a meeting was held in which all students who rode school buses were told about the BMP. Another meeting similar to that one is overdue. I believe that parent involvement was increased and that parents are interested in the BMP. Therefore, parents should be used to their fullest potential in helping the BMP, and I would suggest using parents trained in mediation to help supervise peer mediation sessions. Finally, I believe bus driver and company involvement could be increased by holding more frequent driver meetings, and by keeping bus company dispatchers up to date on the Olson BMP. It was suggested at one point to give dispatchers a packet of information about the BMP which they could then give to new drivers assigned routes with Olson School.

On a larger scale, staff support and communication are keys to the success of any new school program, and I believe that these played an integral role in the success and some of the limitations of the BMP. It would have been helpful both to the BMP and to the other behavior programs and specialists at Olson to begin with common goals and a common data base of student information. There were some students in the school who were dealt with on a regular basis, and who may have been having mediation sessions with the behavior specialist as well as peer mediators from the BMP in the same day. The next day the assistant principal may have talked with this student, and none of the three adults involved with the student may have known that the others were also working with him/her. In addition, we who designed and worked with the BMP on a daily basis may have had different ideas about what the program's objectives were than other staff members who knew less about the program. I believe that in each of these cases more communication would have led to better results for the BMP, for other behavior programs in the school, and for the students.

Staff support, especially the support of classroom teachers, was a necessary component in the BMP. Since students were taken out of class for mediation training and for mediation sessions, students of teachers who did not support the BMP or who did not believe students should be let out of class to participate in the program were at a distinct disadvantage. Because of many cooperative teachers the majority of students learned the necessary mediation skills and benefited from the program. Because of a few less

cooperative teachers, some students did not get to attend many training sessions and did not fully benefit from the BMP. Finally, I think the BMP, or any conflict resolution/mediation program, works best when staff members also support it by modeling the skills used in mediation. That is, when staff members model effective communication, problem-solving skills, and calm conflict resolution students notice this, see how it works, and learn.

BUS MEDIATION BASICS

ROLE OF THE MEDIATOR:

- *BE NEUTRAL
- *SET RULES. ENFORCE RULES

- *FACILITATE COMMUNICATION
- *DO NOT SOLVE THE PROBLEM

GROUND RULES:

- *AGREE TO TRY TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM
- *NO NAME-CALLING OR PUT-DOWNS

- *NO INTERRUPTING
- *BE AS HONEST AS YOU CAN

STAGES:

1. **INTRODUCTION:** INTRODUCE YOURSELVES AND REVIEW RULES (DO YOU AGREE TO...?).

2. **DEFINE PROBLEM:** EACH SIDE TELL THEIR SIDE OF THE STORY AND HOW THEY FEEL. MEDIATORS REPEAT STORY BACK AND ASK IF EACH SIDE HEARD THE OTHER.

3. **FIND A SOLUTION:** BRAINSTORM. DISPUTANTS AND MEDIATORS WORK ON FINDING A SOLUTION THAT **BOTH DISPUTANTS CAN AGREE TO**. ADD "WHAT IF?" CLAUSE (WHAT IF THIS HAPPENS AGAIN?).

4. **FINALIZE AGREEMENT:** WRITE DOWN THE SOLUTION AND HAVE DISPUTANTS SIGN THE FORM.

PROCEDURES:

*ALL STUDENTS WHO RIDE A BUS WILL BE GIVEN A GREEN **BUS MEDIATION REQUEST CARD**. STUDENTS WHO WANT A PROBLEM MEDIATED WILL FILL OUT THE CARD AND GIVE IT TO THEIR **DRIVER** AS THEY GET OFF THE BUS.

*AS **BUS MEDIATORS** GET OFF THE BUS, **DRIVERS** WILL GIVE THE **REQUEST CARDS** TO A **BUS MEDIATOR**. **DRIVERS** WILL HAVE **EXTRA REQUEST CARDS** AND ENVELOPES TO HOLD THEM.

***BUS MEDIATORS** WILL TURN IN THE **REQUEST CARDS** TO DR. WILDERSON, MISS HAHN, MR. WHEYE, OR MRS. LEFFERT.

*DR. WILDERSON AND MISS HAHN WILL SCHEDULE **MEDIATION SESSIONS** AND CALL **BUS MEDIATORS** AND DISPUTANTS OUT OF CLASS AS NEEDED FOR MEDIATION.

OLSON CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL
1607-51st Avenue North
Minneapolis, MN. 55430

Ms. Ann P. Widseth, Principal
Dr. Ida-Lorraine Wilderson, Assistant Principal

MEDIATION FORM

Mediators: _____

Disputants: _____

Referred By: Self _____ Other _____

Ground Rules -

- * Agree to try to solve the problem
- * No name calling or put downs
- * No interrupting
- * Be as honest as you can

What was the conflict about? _____

The disputants agreed to: _____

What if? _____

Disputants' Signatures: _____

Date: _____

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'EPA' or similar, with a long horizontal line extending from the top of the signature.